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CIA Plot Rumored in Costa Rica

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SAN JOSE, Costa Rica — The Costa Rican government has asked the Nixon Administration to recall the reputed CIA chief in Costa Rica amid rumors of an attempt to overthrow President Jose Figueres.

One San Jose newspaper said the recall of U.S. Ambassador Walter C. Ploeser also has been demanded, but the foreign ministry and President Figueres vigorously have denied it.

Apparently to avoid embarrassment to the United States, Costa Rica also officially denies that it has obtained the recall of Earl (Ted) Williamson. But it is known that he is expected to leave the country by Feb. 22 for another assignment. Williamson, first secretary of the U.S. embassy, is widely regarded in San Jose as a CIA representative.

THE situation so deteriorated last month that C. Allen Stewart, a longtime friend of Figueres who is now a State Department trouble-shooter for Latin America, was quietly rushed to San Jose in an effort to straighten out the mess.

The State Department reportedly was astonished at the suggestion that the United States might be involved in any plot against the democratically elected government of Costa Rica, long considered one of the hemisphere's most democratic and pro-American nations.

The entire problem was further aggravated by the departure on January 9 of Larry Harrison, popular young director of the U.S. aid program in Costa Rica. He left on a scheduled trip to Washington and did not return.

HARRISON'S departure officially was described as a "routine" transfer but it is widely accepted in Costa Rica that he was, in effect, fired by the ambassador, perhaps after becoming too indignant over the course of events within the embassy.

Harrison is now special assistant to Herman Kleine, deputy coordinator of the Alliance for Progress program in Washington.

ONLY fragments of the story have surfaced in the Costa Rican press. All of it may never be known. But it is, possibly, from reliable sources both here and in the United States, to piece together some of the events.

The episode is believed to have had its genesis with the election, and subsequent inauguration in May 1970, of Figueres — a charter member of Latin America's so-called "democratic left" — to a four-year term as president.

Almost immediately Figueres began "building bridges" to the Communist bloc, with Costa Rica becoming the first Central American nation to establish diplomatic and commercial ties with the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe.

The move created consternation within some of the military-run governments of Central America.

And it also apparently aroused concern within the American Embassy — said to be deeply divided between liberals and conservatives.

BY LAST fall, reports were reaching Costa Rican officials of Williamson's close ties with members of the political opposition and of indiscreet remarks made by his Cuban wife regarding the country's alleged march toward communism.

Williamson, who had served in Cuba just before the Castro takeover, also was blamed for the seizure and burning of some Marxist literature coming in through the airport. The blame arose through his involvement in a technical assistance program on security.

In late October or early November, the Costa Rican government made an informal suggestion through the

State Department's Costa Rican Desk in Washington that Williamson be removed.

No action was taken, although Ploeser is said to have complained to Figueres about going over his head and lodging complaints with an "office boy" or "errand boy" in Washington.

Figueres, in turn, is said to have replied that it wasn't his concern if the State Department ran its Costa Rican Desk through an office boy; that his interest was in having Williamson recalled to avert a major scandal.

THEN, on Dec. 17, a fisherman reported sighting a mysterious ship which had unloaded "long, wooden boxes" on a remote beach near Punta Salsipuedes on the Osa Peninsula, in the southern part of the country on the Pacific side.

The ship was identified as the Waltham, and the Costa Rican government later received information that the vessel was registered to the "commercial section" of the State Department. That apparently was inaccurate.

In fact, neither Jane's Fighting Ships nor Lloyd's Registry lists any Waltham. The closest to it is the Waltham Victory, a 455-foot vessel owned by the U.S. Commerce Department and registered at the port of San Francisco. There is nothing to suggest that it was the same ship sighted off Costa Rica.

IT WAS first reported that the "long, wooden boxes" contained weapons, although by the time a Costa Rican Civil Guard patrol got to the rugged region all that was found was a few Coke bottles and some cellophane wrappers.

A story was later put out that it apparently was whiskey contraband that had been put ashore, although it is believed the Costa Rican government still does not know for sure. The contraband story

presumably was put out to dispel rumors of a coup against the government.

If the boxes did contain weapons, their ultimate purpose can only be guessed.

But in this atmosphere of coup talk, Williamson allegedly remarked that the Figueres government would not last much longer. The remark got back to Costa Rican officials.

EARLY in the week of Jan. 4, the Costa Rican ambassador in Washington requested and was granted an urgent meeting with Charles Meyer, assistant secretary of state for inter American affairs.

Meyer reportedly was astonished at the suggestion the United States might be involved in an alleged plot to overthrow Figueres; he assured the ambassador of Washington's continued goodwill toward Costa Rica, and promised immediate action.

On Thursday, Jan. 7, Stewart arrived in Costa Rica and remained through the weekend. His visit included a long conversation with Figueres, during which the alleged Costa Rican move toward the Communist camp presumably was discussed.

On Sunday, Jan. 10, while Stewart was still in town, a brief article appeared on Page 18 of La Nacion, a morning tabloid and San Jose's largest circulation daily.

It speculated that the Costa Rican government was considering declaring Williamson persona non grata.

The next day, Jan. 11, on Page 51 of La Nacion, an article appeared under a two-column headline in which Costa Rican Foreign Minister Gonzalo Facio denied the report.

"THE GOVERNMENT of Costa Rica," Facio said, "has not considered declaring (persona) non grata Mr. Williamson, director of special affairs at the American Embassy, nor any other member

of this distinguished diplomatic mission."

Pacio's statement added, however, that he understood that "within a short time Mr. Williamson, who has served in Costa Rica for more than four years, will be transferred to another destination." This was in accord with normal diplomatic practices, Pacio said.

It is understood that Williamson will now leave the country by Feb. 22.

The rumors continued, however, occasionally surfacing in the press.

ON JAN. 14, a statement signed by three government party congressmen appeared in *Diario de Costa Rica*, an afternoon tabloid and sister paper to *La Hora*.

Among other things, the statement said it was known "positively" that Williamson had "mixed directly" in criticism of the Figueres Administration and that he had made "intolerable remarks" against the government.

The statement also accused the CIA of being involved in the mysterious ship movements and the alleged arms drop near Punta Salsipuedes.

LA HORA, a San Jose morning tabloid of limited circulation, reported Jan. 30 in a front-page story that Figueres also has asked the United States to recall Ploeser, the conservative midwestern businessman assigned here as ambassador in April 1970. *La Hora* attributed its information to a member of Figueres cabinet.

Through it all, expressions of public regret, as if meant to deliberately needle the American Embassy, continued to pour from Costa Rican officials about the departure of Harrison, the U.S. aid chief in Costa Rica.

Ploeser himself has taken charge of the aid program as part of a worldwide reorganization of U.S. foreign assistance.

An amiable man who celebrated his 64th birthday Jan. 7, the day Stewart arrived in town, Ploeser insists that both Harrison's departure and Williamson's pending departure are "routine transfers" and that he stands by the Costa Rican foreign minister's statements in both cases.

ment appearing in the local press Jan. 24, noted that Harrison's transfer was a "normal and usual thing within the U.S. State Department" and that Ploeser would take direct charge of the aid program.)

Williamson and Harrison, says Ploeser, "are both good men."

STEWART'S visit to Costa Rica, Ploeser says, was purely coincidental -- that he had been in Guatemala, called up and said he was in the area and would "like to come down for a couple of days and see my old friend, Pepe (Figueres)."

Ploeser also scoffs at rumors of low morale within the embassy. "You'd have a hard time finding morale any better than it is here right now."

On the face of it, sending Ploeser to represent the United States before a government headed by Figueres would seem like trying to mix oil with water.

Orphaned at seven and a classic example of the self-made man, Ploeser (pronounced Play-zer) classifies himself as a political "middle-reader." His background indicates a more conservative philosophy.

As early as 1930, he was calling for the removal of "punitive taxes on business" and correction of a hostile government attitude toward business. In 1944, during a bid for reelection to Congress, he charged that continuation of Roosevelt's New Deal would mean an American monarchy. Roosevelt's post-war plans, Ploeser claimed, called for setting up of "what amounts to a fascist state, with the government conscripting enterprise, capital and labor as well."

IN 1946, he was a prime election target of organized labor but still managed to win a third term as a congressman from Missouri. He later was defeated, in 1948, while seeking a fourth term.

In 1957, Ploeser was appointed by the Eisenhower Administration as ambassador to Paraguay, where he was awarded the Grand Cross of Paraguay by the government of Gen. Alfredo Stroessner, last of Latin America's old-style caudillos. Ploeser resigned the post in 1959.

national committeeman from Missouri from 1964 to 1966. In 1964 there was pressure on him to run for governor of Missouri, but he declined.

AFTER his appointment as ambassador to Costa Rica was announced, he was asked what he thought the Nixon Administration policy toward Latin America should be. He said:

"We should go in available to help a country, not go in like a school-teacher and say, 'Here are all the answers.'"

He also had a comment on career diplomats, saying he thought that Nixon and other presidents were right in appointing ambassadors from sources other than the Foreign Service. He said he felt that Foreign Service officials could lack decisiveness.

"This stems from the system of grading within the Foreign Service. Knowing that promotions depend on a written evaluation of work, professional diplomats hesitate to take courageous stands," he was quoted as saying. "This lack of courage in the pinch grows out of a lifetime of trying not to make a mistake."

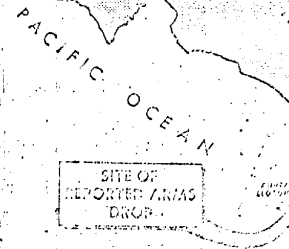
WHILE Ploeser's philosophy is oriented more to that of the pragmatic and successful midwestern businessman which he is, Figueres' philosophy leans in the direction of the eastern intellectual establishment.

He led, in 1948, an anti-Communist revolution in Costa Rica, then became provisional president. He was elected to a five-year term as constitutional president in 1953.

Figueres, who considers himself a Social Democrat of the European variety, has always been closely identified with U.S. intellectuals of the Schlesinger-Stevenson-Kennedy philosophy, and at one time was accorded an honorary membership in the Americans for Democratic Action. His wife, the former Karen Olsen, is a New York-born sociologist.

Figueres, 64, was inaugurated May 8, 1970, for his current four-year term.

Ploeser arrived to take up his duties April 13, about three weeks before the inauguration.



Continued

Key Figures in Costa Rica Drama

Walter C. Ploeser



Ploeser

St. Louis insurance executive long active Republican politics. Nixon Administration political appointee as U.S. ambassador to Costa Rica in early 1970. Post had been vacant for several months and was one of last Latin American ambassadorial jobs filled by Nixon Administration after taking office.

Ploeser, 64, served as U.S. ambassador to Paraguay from 1957 to 1959 as Eisenhower Administration political appointee. Awarded Grand Cross of Paraguay by government of Paraguayan strongman Alfredo Stroessner. Resigned as ambassador in 1959.

Entered politics in 1930 with election to Missouri State House of Representatives. Served four terms in U.S. Congress as representative from Missouri 1941-1949. Defeat-

ed in bid for fifth term in 1948 elections. Pressure on him to run as GOP candidate for governor of Missouri in 1964 but declined. Republican national committeeman from 1964 to 1966.

Classifies himself as political "middle-roader" but background reflects more conservative orientation. Prime target of organized labor in 1946 election to Congress. Staunch opponent of Roosevelt New Deal. Active in immediate post-war years in anti-Communist activities as national chairman of Demolay Committee on American activities.

Took up post as ambassador to Costa Rica in April 1970, shortly before Jose (Pepe) Figueres was inaugurated as Costa Rican president.

Jose 'Pepe' Figueres

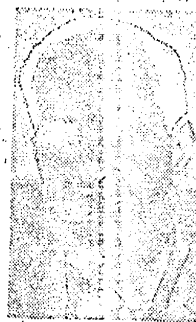
Constitutionally elected president of Costa Rica who took office for third time May 8, 1970. Had served an elected term from 1953-58 and also a year as provisional president in 1948-49 after leading successful anti-Communist revolution in his Central American country.

First nine months of current administration marked by opening of commercial and diplomatic relations with Communist bloc nations of Eastern Europe, making Costa Rica first Central American nation to do so. Has caused concern in some military-dominated governments of the region and in conservative circles within Costa Rica.

Figueres, 64, is internationally known

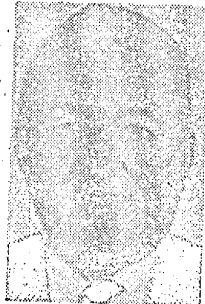
liberal democrat with philosophical ties to the Social Democrats of Europe. Also well acquainted in U.S. intellectual circles, particularly among Kennedyites and has lectured at Harvard and other American universities. Charter member, along with Puerto Rico's Luis Munoz Marin and Venezuela's Romulo Betancourt, of Latin America's so-called "democratic left."

Has written several books, articles and pamphlets on political philosophy and also on the aspirations of Costa Rica's National Liberation Party (PLN), which he founded after 1948 revolution. Married to former Karen Olsen, a New York born sociologist.



Figueres

Bearl 'Ted' Williamson



Williamson

First Secretary of American Embassy in San Jose, Costa Rica. Recall has been asked by Costa Rican government for allegedly involving himself in country's internal affairs. Listed as embassy political officer but commonly regarded in Costa Rica as CIA chief of station. Due to leave country by Feb. 22, 1971.

Background sketchy but Foreign Service Registry lists place of birth as New York City on March 13, 1915. Served in U.S. Army from 1941 to 1948. Member of the executive staff of the governor of the Panama Canal Zone from 1948 to 1952.

Apparently joined Foreign Service in 1952 and was assigned to Havana as political officer, remaining there for most of immediate pre-Castro period. Married to Cuban. Appointed as political officer to American Embassy in Spain in 1960. Returned to Washington in 1966. Assigned to Costa Rica in 1968.

Registry says Williamson has had "private experience" but gives no indication where or when. Also identifies him as once an assistant manager of an electric company but gives no further details.

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EDITORIALS

No Reason And No Excuse For Meddling In Costa Rica

COSTA RICA is the jewel of Central America. Indeed, there may be no more attractive country in all of Latin America.

It has strong democratic traditions, a highly developed educational system, no army, flexible class lines, relatively high economic levels and enlightened leaders.

As an operating democracy, it has few peers. In the last five presidential elections, for example, the party in power was defeated each time.

Costa Rica's president, Jose Figueres, has earned himself a distinguished place in his nation's — and Latin America's — history.

He was a leader of the 1948 revolution that resulted in the country's present constitutional system. As one of the founders of the "democratic left" approach to Latin America's problems, along with Romulo Bentancourt of Venezuela and Luis Munoz Marin of Puerto Rico, he was in effect one of the architects of President Kennedy's Alliance for Progress.

President Figueres and Costa Rica have been outstanding friends of the United States. Their contributions to democracy in this hemisphere have become legend.

Just last October, when the U.S. State Department published its routine Background Notes on Costa Rica, it commented:

"Relations between the United States and Costa Rica have been particularly warm and cordial, owing in large part to a sincere mutual respect for shared democratic traditions."

Yet, despite all this, the United States Embassy in Costa Rica has become linked to a disgraceful effort to discredit President Figueres and perhaps overthrow him.

The Herald's Latin America editor, Don Bohning, has disclosed that reputed CIA station chief Earl "Ted" Williamson was so involved and that Ambassador Walter C. Ploeser was apparently aware of Mr. Williamson's activities.

Mr. Williamson already has been recalled at the request of Costa Rica.

We suggest that President Nixon bring home the ambassador.

These actions constitute meddling of the worst sort. We can find no excuse for them. Mr. Ploeser appears to have been a poor choice for the job in the first place.

The United States owes it to Costa Rica, and to itself, to send an ambassador to Costa Rica who has greater sensitivity and appreciation for constitutional democracy.

What the CIA does is another matter. That secret organization has often complained of public malignment and misunderstanding. It repeatedly has denied charges that it makes its own foreign policy when it goes into the field. The current case in Costa Rica raises a question about those denials.

The whole affair deserves an investigation by Congress, and we recommend it to Rep. Dante Fascell's House subcommittee on Inter-American Affairs.